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Defense and Secrecy

The more information the public is given on swiftly changing military defense affairs, the less likely the picture is to get out of focus. Yet President Kennedy, Defense Secretary McNamara and various Senators and Representatives want tighter restrictions on military data. What has happened to set this ground swell for greater secrecy into motion?

Chairman Russell of the Senate Armed Services Committee, who on Monday got a \$12,500,000,000 defense authorization bill through the Senate after less than an hour of debate and a minimum of explanation, said the Committee hoped both "Congress and the Executive will make a new start in their policies on publicizing the details of our defense program."

This bill was unusual in that it added \$525,000,000 for B-52 bombers although President Kennedy had not sought such funds. Such an order for bombers would stimulate a section of the aviation industry which has been hurt by the steady transition toward missiles. There must have been economic thinking as well as military here.

Senator Russell told the Senators on the floor that, "It is not inconceivable that we would destroy ourselves by insisting on a full exercise of the privilege of knowing the most intimate defense information." The danger of such self-destruction is rather remote. Neither is it likely that convincing evidence on the need for more bombers would be harmful.

A more liberal view on defense matters is that of Senator Symington, also a member of the Armed Services Committee, who criticized the Pentagon for withholding from the people "broad, important policy problems they have the right to know about." Mr. Symington, who heard the testimony on the \$12,500,000,000 bill, called the attention of the Senate to the hundreds of deletions made in the testimony by the Pentagon, many "for public relations reasons only." He pointed out that information the Pentagon released on Soviet missile progress was "contrary to the present policy of the CIA in classified hearings."

The American people have the right to know about the key problems and also about the details of many such matters except where such knowledge would be genuinely harmful to national defense. Otherwise it is the American people and not the Soviets who are going to be kept in the dark.